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L.A. County court changes for eviction cases to begin March 18

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A Los Angeles County Superior Court plan to cut costs by reducing the number of courthouses hearing eviction cases will start March 18, officials announced Friday.

The number hearing such cases, known as unlawful detainers, will be reduced from 26 to five throughout the county. Some people will have to travel up to 32 miles to litigate their cases, officials said.

Under the new plan, all limited-jurisdiction unlawful detainer cases must be filed in a regional "hub" courthouse, according to an order by Superior Court Presiding Judge David S. Wesley signed Thursday.

The cases will be heard only in Pasadena, Long Beach, Santa Monica, the Antelope Valley Courthouse in Lancaster and the Stanley Mosk Courthouse in downtown Los Angeles.

Existing limited-jurisdiction unlawful detainer cases will be handled in the courthouses where they were originally filed "until court notification is given to litigants prior to their existing unlawful detainer cases being transferred to a hub courthouse," Wesley wrote.

The new filing locations will be posted in every courthouse and will be listed online (<http://lasuperiorcourt.org/>), according to the order.

In the last fiscal year, 67,182 eviction lawsuits were filed in Los Angeles County courts, said Mary Hearn, a court spokeswoman.

The changes come as the court system works to close a \$56-million-to-\$85-million budget shortfall by the beginning of the next fiscal year July 1, Hearn said. The assigning of eviction cases to certain courts is part of an overall cost-cutting plan that includes the closure of 10 regional courthouses.

Plans also call for the creation of trial hubs to handle small claims, collections and personal injury cases.

Court officials say the bulk of savings from the overall plan will come from layoffs, though it is unclear how many court workers will lose their jobs, Hearn said.

Legal advocates for the poor say the plan to reduce the courthouses hearing eviction cases will disproportionately harm low-income tenants fighting eviction.

For some, the trips could take several hours using public transportation and include transfers on multiple trains and buses, said Neal Dudovitz, executive director of Neighborhood Legal Services of Los Angeles County. That travel time is of particular concern in eviction cases because the courts move quickly, he said.

In the Van Nuys court alone, more than 8,000 unlawful detainer cases were filed in 2011, records show. Under the court's plan, those cases--as well as those from several other courthouses--would be moved to the Santa Monica courthouse, which had about 4,600 unlawful detainer cases filed in 2011.

The changes, advocates say, could overwhelm courthouses, create longer lines and cause cases to be handled more slowly.

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